

# **Reconnoitring Transnational Identity and Hybridity in Monica Ali's *In The Kitchen***

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## **Abstract**

Multicultural identities as they evolved in Britain, have contributed to an increasing heterogeneity and hybridisation of national identities. The notions associated with the new spirit also paved the way for new, creative contributions in the field of literature that negotiate hybrid identity concepts. The concept of race, class, culture, gender and ethnicity represents the subject of a multicultural approach, which also encourages respect for the dignity of life and the voices of the forgotten. The topic **“Reconnoitring Transnational Identity and Hybridity in Monica Ali's *In The Kitchen*”** explores the struggle for identity that people with ethnic origin have to face while attempting to assimilate into society. Monica Ali's, *In the Kitchen* mainly points attention towards matters such as social assimilation of immigrant generations, identity crisis, discrimination, predestination, or racism. Monica Ali addresses issues connected to multicultural society, as she herself experiences it through the eyes of an individual of hybrid origin and a descendant of immigrants in society.

**Keywords:** migration, cosmopolitan, transnational, life narrative, human trafficking.

## **1. INTRODUCTION**

Since the 1970's, there has been increasing concern with the impact of Colonialism and Post Colonialism on British identities and Culture and the influence that the former British Empire still has on people in the former colonies and in Britain today. British writers' books are representative of a large group of multicultural novels and productions created during the last few decades. Although Multiculturalism is not new, there has been a special boon of writers of the British Empire during the last ten years. Cultural studies have laid a special emphasis upon problems of spatiality and spatial relations in the attempt to trace their influence upon the politics of identity, discussing the relocation of cultural spaces and the redefinition of their inhabiting identities.

Monica Ali born in Dhaka, Bangladesh depicts underclass migrants from the former British Colonies, war torn African states and Eastern Europe in a London hotel, in which British citizens also work under precarious conditions. Monica Ali is a British author born in 1967 in East Pakistan, called Bangladesh then, to a Bangladeshi father and English mother. Ali moved to England with her parents and had her education at the University of Oxford. She did philosophy, economics and politics at the prestigious Wadham College. She was first very much

interested in designing and publishing and later moved on to writing. Monica Ali's debut novel *Brick Lane* caused a sensation in 2003.

Monica Ali's *In the Kitchen*, returns to London as a setting and renders the kitchen of a hotel as a microcosm of state and society. Here she explores opportunities and dangers in a society which risks falling to pieces under the pressure of capitalism and globalisation. Globalisation has changed the post colonial character of migration Literature in Great Britain. Children of immigrants from the colonies have become British citizens who might literally or metaphorically revisit the places of their origins. Cultural hybridity like the discourses from which it emerges, has multilateral histories that defy easy summary or efforts to articulate a single, coherent definition. There have certainly been crucial interventions, such as Homi Bhabha's which have significant and wide ranging implications for various forms of hybridity. Bhabha's theory suggests a notion of cutting and mixing cultural traditions to some of his interlocutors and a notion of moving beyond identity categories altogether to others.

Monica Ali's *In the Kitchen*, published in 2009, is set during the height of the market excesses prior to the 2008-2009 global financial crisis - when Britalons under the stewardship of a New Labour government that remained sued, among other things, to pursue state deregulation and the restriction of welfare; to strengthen the City's global financial services; to knit the British economy with the European Union in a single market and to rebrand Britain as a post-imperial, cosmopolitan centre of culture and style. It is clearly explored *In the Kitchen*, depicts a condition-of-England novel for the twenty-first century, and reveals the existence of key concerns about citizenship. Also the novel updates the concerns for a transnational age in which the territorial and sovereign borders of the nation-state are increasingly porous. In particular, it is highlighted with many aspects of the novel's explorations of the contemporary state of citizenship in Britain: the erosion of the rights of citizenship and of human rights as a consequence of neoliberal deregulation, the problematic displacement of the political questions of rights and citizenship for the cultural ones of national identity, Also the affliction of citizenship, which acquires a deeper and more vital significance in the context of immigration and asylum.

*In the Kitchen*, the novel focuses on human rights and abuses and the corrosions of the rights of citizenship, thus provocatively reframes for us all the familiar issue of national identity. The predictable question, intensified by the transnational flows of commodities and labor, is raised in the novel as a red herring, shown to be the mistaken preoccupation with the ethno cultural concerns of national identity that detracts from more pressing issues of political citizenship and social injustice. Monica Ali's *In the Kitchen* novel proceeds from contemporary concepts of citizenship in the context of migration, which focuses on an individual's search for solidarity and responsibility with strangers. This novel is presented as a metaphorical negotiation of cosmopolitan citizenship. Gabriel Lightfoot's search of identity and life narrative, also leads to the collective experiences of solidarity and responsibility that represent cosmopolitan citizenship in the novel.

*In the Kitchen* brings the subsumed complex of work and life and is presented through the lens of a generalised precarious condition. The intersecting trajectories of Gabriel Lightfoot, an executive chef at the Imperial Hotel in London with entrepreneurial plans of his own, and those of his underlings, a global multitude of migrant and refugee workers lives are charted through this novel. Monica Ali rehearses in this novel a number of subjective strategies through which the creative worker overcomes his disabling guilt about the precarious world of labor of which he is both a part and a fundamental proponent.

The protagonist of the novel Gabriel Lightfoot is the executive chef of the Imperial Hotel. He runs the kitchen where people from all over the world work. He plans to open his own restaurant and has recently proposed to his girlfriend Charlie. When he learns that his father has cancer, he returns home to his middle class family from a Northern English town, where he is confronted with his childhood and family secrets. When Gabriel Lightfoot's fiancée learns of his affair with Lena, she leaves him, and he in turn seems to lose all sense of who he was before and finally finds a way back into his life.

Gabriel Lightfoot is a self managing creative professional with rather inefficient supervisors above him and also wanted to be an entrepreneur with concrete plans for opening his own business. The interior and domestic life of the protagonist is also the site of dramatic concern, the story of his descent into and recovery from mental illness is presented in a relatively straightforward fashion without any elaborate met fictional framing. Monica Ali does slyly work against her narrative's own dominant focus, as she uses the character of Oona to gesture towards a more compelling though only shakily articulated, vision of the kind of selfless common sympathy that might counter the trends that privilege, but also beset her protagonist. Monica Ali's primary subject is the new world of work, and she connects her protagonist's troubled subjectivity to the absence of a defining social milieu or overarching narrative that might lend immediate significance to his existence.

Things start to get complicated for Gabriel Lightfoot from the very beginning of the novel, as the dead body of one of the hotel's night porters is discovered in the kitchen's basement, where he had been living clandestinely. There is a central precarious narrative ensuing from this tragic inaugural event as Lena, the porter's lover, immediately enters Gabriel Lightfoot's life and home as a surviving reminder of the existential precariousness that this death announces and as an ineluctable backdrop to his individual project of self advancement. A Belarussian ex-prostitute with a frightful history of sexual violence and a lingering air of impenetrable mystery about her, Lena punctuates Gabriel Lightfoot's development throughout the novel and ends up triggering an upheaval, a transformation that goes beyond the limited preview of his entrepreneurial subjectivity.

Gabriel himself oscillates between thinking that hers is a familiar story and wondering why he should believe a word that she said, trying to catch her inconsistencies. He often prefers not to listen to her stories at all. After she tells of how she had been prepared for her work as an enslaved prostitute - by being repeatedly gang-raped. Gabriel is frequently depicted as a state official seeking to verify the credibility to evoke Lena into furiously demanding, to catch her inconsistencies. In Gabriel's varied reactions to Lena's fragmented narratives, the turning away from stories of exploitation and abuse, the subordination of these narratives to familiar conventions, the expectations of credibility in such tales. Gabriel's moral growth is signalled by his realisation that human rights violations and stories of asylum require an altogether different mode.

*In the Kitchen* blurs differences which separate migrants from people who seem to belong to the dominant ethnic group within society. People from all walks of life and countries meet in the Imperial hotel. The kitchen belongs to the forgotten members of a transcultural underclass who work and solve their problems together, not in spite of cultural differences but because of them. Everybody develops a sense of belonging in the hotel, although none of them belong there. The novel's main concern however is not the domestic, but the transnational migrant body of workers who populate London. Gabriel Lightfoot presides over a kitchen which he compares to that of the United Nations task force as he points out that every corner of the world was represented there. But far from the liberal cosmopolitan haven that Gabriel Lightfoot imagines, London's transnational community is composed of asylum seekers, trafficked immigrants and undocumented workers who have been violently deprived of human rights. *In the Kitchen* focuses on human rights abuses and the corrosion of the rights of citizenship which provocatively reframes the issue of national identity.

Monica Ali's *In the Kitchen* documents, the deleterious effects of transnational economic flows on the structures of citizenship in Britain today. These effects are all too visible in Blantwistle, the Northern industrial town that is dying with the last mill standing and is almost about to close its door, because the manufacturing can be done much cheaper elsewhere. The moving of industrial production to overseas sites with cheaper labor costs leads to acute regional unemployment, while the deregulation of domestic labor laws bring about a casualization of available jobs.

Gabriel Lightfoot's sister works for a call centre that may be shut down because they were looking for an Indian call centre, which will be much cheaper. The chronic economic insecurity of those left behind fuels Islamic fundamentalism, antisocial behaviour and racism, so the novel implies, for Blantwistle is full of disaffected youth who can find no steady work. Gabriel Lightfoot's nephew, Harley is also unemployed. Harley, is out of work and another one also, who is being taken to court for vandalism and who needs a job. When Ted converses with a Pakistani neighbour, Nazir, the latter reveals about the undeniable irony in a South Asian repeating the same xenophobic accusations of unsanitary overcrowding that white Britons had directed toward colonial subjects immigrating into Britain after the 1948 British Nationality Act. Nazir's scapegoating of the Polish not only shows that the present day demarcations of immigration baveltered with a rapid influx of nations of citizenship.

The novel brings out the violation of human rights through international human trafficking. *In the Kitchen* highlights both the erosion of and new possibilities for citizenship that have transnational effects. On one hand, global capitalism and the winding back of the national welfare state has systematically undermined the rights of citizenship and intensified social exclusions. On the other hand, the progressive linking together of the national rights of citizenship with transnational human rights is clearly portrayed. Especially after Britain passed the 1998 Human Rights Act which has facilitated clearer ways of demarcating citizenship, a political status to which rights and obligations are attached, from nationality, an ethno cultural form of identity.

*In the Kitchen* revolves around the problematic displacement of the political questions of rights and citizenship for the cultural ones of national identity, which acquires a deeper and more vital significance in the context of immigration. The protagonist of *In the Kitchen*, Gabriel Lightfoot is the executive chef at the Imperial Hotel in London, hoping to open a restaurant of his own by partnering with a businessman, Rolly and a new labor

politician, Fair weather who are to finance the operation. Like Gabriel, Fairweather celebrates plurality by comparing Britishness to the economy, deregulated in the extreme. It's a marketplace of ideas and values and cultures. Fairweather suggests that the ethos of multicultural diversity is the correlate of the economic doctrine of free markets and multinational capitalism.

By focusing on a chef, Ali draws attention to the new economy that has displaced the old Gabriel works in the service industry, unlike his father, Ted, who has spent his life working in a mill in the fictional northern town of Blantwistle - and places at the novel's heart the neoliberal entrepreneur who desires his own business instead of wage employment. The eclipse of manufacturing for finance, the centralisation of wealth and power in London and the corresponding decline of northern industrial cities, is symbolised through a sustained conflict between Gabriel and Ted, the latter of who is dying of cancer. Indeed, it becomes the very subject of disagreement between father and son. Ted laments what he perceives to be irredeemable national decay and often complains. Gabriel counters by citing the prosperity that international banking and finance and advertising have brought the nation, new and invisible service industries based on a knowledge economy.

The historical context of the argument between Gabriel and Ted lies, of course, in the process of economic liberalisation that has fundamentally restructured British society since the 1980s. Although New Labour had promised a Third Way of governance - a middle path between Thatcherite neoliberalism and postwar social democracy, the policies it enacted essentially focused on reinforcing and extending the neo-liberal marketing trends of the Thatcher period. Ted and Gabriel's competing diagnoses of the new economy led to a corresponding clash in definitions of Britishness. Ted, the voice of a persistent postcolonial melancholia, announces,

"We've lost the Great' [in Great Britain.] Know what else we've lost? Britishness. People keep talking about it. That's how you know it's gone.... We used to know what it meant to be English. It's a dirty word now, that is" (*In the kitchen* 187).

Ted and Gabriel Lightfoot's competing diagnoses of the new economy lead to a corresponding clash in British identity. Ted's lamentations for the past English grandeur is tied up with a problematic narrative of imperial decline that sees the immigration of foreigners as an unwelcome incursion and the critique of radicalised British as an attack on traditional culture. He exaggeratedly mocks his father for missing the old days when they had the good old National Front and swastikas sprayed on every railway bridge and underpass, and brags in and about the new Britain where he has Somalis, Poles, Serbs, Russians working in his kitchen. Yet Gabriel's urbane and cosmopolitan embrace of cultural diversity is no less satirised, revealed to be just another manifestation of the logic of neo-liberalism. Cultural, ethnic and national identities however are inadequate frames of analysis for investigating the different problems that transnational has thrown up, from the increase of economic precariousness to the global trafficking of humans as commodities.

*In the Kitchen* represents a shift in locale from white chapel in Brick Lane to the Imperial Hotel at Piccadilly in the centre of middle class London. It's a low paid hub for refugees and immigrants from India, Somalia, Mongolia, Philippines and Eastern Europe. These migrants bring along the stories of their home countries, which are told on various occasions to Gabriel Lightfoot who is their superior, although he does not act like one. Gabriel does not see him as a British superior to immigrants from the colonies, but as one citizen among others who share a similar life world. Every corner of the earth was represented in the novel, Hispanic, Asian, African, Baltic, Somalia, Mongolian, Philippines.

Gabriel Lightfoot reveals a keen insight into why his father cannot recognise immigrants as citizens. He locates the opposition to multiculturalism in rural areas, because this kind of Xenophobia and post imperial melancholia does not inform the transcultural life. It is in the World of the London kitchen, he feels that he is among people with whom he belongs. His controversy with his father over British identity is crucial. Ted argues that Britishness has gone as new people come and change the land. Gabriel Lightfoot cannot agree with this view. In his experience, citizenship is defined differently because society has changed. He feels that there is no point trying to keep everything the same. He also adds that because things are different, it does not sense that it is worse.

Gabriel Lightfoot's father voices an interpretation of the loss of British identity and he believes that a consumer culture offers choices of identity to corrupt people. In the novel the proper subjectivity is metaphorically given to immigrants by making their belonging to the kitchen the rule rather than exception. The novel's narrative allows us to approach a concept of civil solidarity and cosmopolitan citizenship that is opposed to the traditional notion of national citizenship. There is no particular identity they could relate to, and they do not enjoy any social benefits. In the onion fields, Gabriel Lightfoot has found his voice as a citizen, realises that his

search for identity and belonging is coming to an end. He at one point loses everyone, literally everything, apart from the loyalty of his staff. He is not depicted as an idealist or someone who knows what he is doing, when he leaves the kitchen and starts working in the onion fields. Rather he is on a journey to himself which is fulfilled when he no longer feels any essential difference between himself and the strangers.

Gabriel Lightfoot's solidarity and responsibility towards the society are deeply entangled in his sense of identity that rarely rewards his qualities. Although his self centred quest causes a lot of confusion in his life, it also prevents him from accepting the views he meets in his rural home town. He is a cosmopolitan citizen who feels like a stranger himself and begins with the other in order to discover his own transcultural identity and affiliations. He demonstrates how difficult it is to shape some form of shaped identity among citizens of very different origins. Citizenship as presented in Gabriel Lightfoot's story decouples the underlying moral boundaries of citizenship from the territorial boundaries of the political community as well as from boundaries of identity.

Gabriel Lightfoot fails because social participation in this case is very much limited to his activities and function as chef in the kitchen. When he leaves the kitchen, he finds dignity as an individual and starts fighting for the recognition of cosmopolitan citizenship. Monica Ali's *In the Kitchen* takes up the issue of contemporary migration to Britain and the reception of these strangers by the host country, where the reception is more hostile and inhospitable than congenial. While the novel is populated with migrants and refugees mainly from poor Eastern European, African and Asian countries, the story's protagonist Gabriel Lightfoot is from Britain.

*In the Kitchen*, Gabriel Lightfoot life begins to unravel when one of the illegal kitchen porters, Yuri a former engineer from the Ukraine is found dead in the hotels basement where he and a girl named Lena, a trafficked sex worker from Moldava, had been living illegally. Following his decision to offer Lena refuge in his flat and the beginning of an obsessive intimate affair with her reflects in ending up his relationship with his longtime girlfriend Charlie. Meanwhile Gabriel Lightfoot takes several journeys back to his desolate hometown; a former milling town in Lancashire, where his father is dying of cancer, his grandmother is suffering from senile dementia and his divorced sister Jeny is struggling to bring up her two teenage children.

As Gabriel Lightfoot's mental and physical health is increasingly deteriorating, he discovers that the restaurant manager is involved in a plot of trafficking women and in supplying cheap work slaves for his brother's onion farm, run as an illegal, exploitative labor camp. When Lena disappears after Gabriel Lightfoot, who by that time is in a state of severe psychosis has given her a substantial amount of money, he accidentally ends up on the arm himself and by sharing the migrants experience, comes out fully restored. The novel ends on the hopeful note of his possible reunion with Charlie. The Imperial Hotel with its strong resonance of Empire was actually built during the Victorian era. The Imperial Hotel seems to have a history which after the hotel's half century seemed to decline. These descriptions of the hotel are clearly reflections of the nostalgia for Britain's former glory, the loss of the Empire and the sad awareness that things will never be the same again.

Behind the screen of the fading old world lies the underworld of illegal workers, asylum seekers and immigrants, the people who clean up and provide the necessary services. The sufferings of the immigrant are vividly portrayed through the character of Yuri. Yuri is referred to be dwelling in the cellar compared to that of the catacombs and is compared to that of the alien. The fact that Yuri's room was located right adjacent to the rubbish chutes suggests that there dwells human waste, that there dwells a disposable life. When it turns out that Yuri's death has only been the result of a self-inflicted unfortunate accident and not the result of a racially motivated hate crime, the hotel manager is too happy to completely dismiss any especially emotional involvement in the death of Yuri.

Monica Ali's *In the Kitchen*, discusses the condition of England during the 21st century which reveals the persistence of key concerns about citizenship and also updates these concerns for a transnational age in which the territory is increasingly porous. *In the Kitchen* novel explores the contemporary state of citizenship in Britain. It brings out the erosion of the rights of citizenship and of human rights as a consequence of neoliberal deregulation and also highlights the problematic displacement of the political questions of rights and citizenship for the cultural ones of national identity. Monica Ali's *In the Kitchen* examines the effects of transnationalism and globalisation on citizenship today.

*In the Kitchen* attends to how the marketisation of labor, longer chains of subcontracting and outsourcing and employers wanting to buy labor as supplies that they can turn on and off as necessary without raising the unit price. *In the Kitchen* not only represents the migrants' experience and their exploitation by Britain, but simultaneously provides a commentary on the current state of the nation. The novel's focus is hence on close

encounters with strangers which in this case, predominantly in the contact zones of the kitchen and of the hotel. It is not with the domestic, but the transnational migrant body of workers who populate London. The novel explores Britain's attitude towards refugees, illegal immigrants and asylum seekers, resulting in racism.

Monica Ali rehearses and updates the anti-racist critiques of state multiculturalism, which insisted that the state had substituted tolerance for the implementation of equal rights. Cultural, ethnic, and national identities, however, are inadequate frames of analysis for investigating the different problems that transnationalism has thrown up, from the increase of economic precariousness to the global trafficking of humans as commodities. It is by returning to the category of citizenship and the historical struggles around its rights and responsibilities that one can grasp the continuing challenges and new possibilities.

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